

A NOTE ON CA-MEN-1912:
THE SPYROCK ROAD SITE, MENDOCINO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTION

The following report provides a brief description of a well known petroglyph site within the North Coast Ranges that has been previously referred to as "Spyrock" with several trinomial site number designations. The purpose of this paper is to identify a permanent trinomial designation for the site and to emphasize its uniqueness and significance towards the understanding of California's rock art, especially in northwestern California.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The site in question is located approximately 10 kilometers north of Laytonville in northern Mendocino County (Figure 1) at an elevation of 2870 feet and within Cahto tribal territory (Myers 1978). The Cahto presently use the site as a "cornerstone" or territory boundary marker. This area supports a vast and open oak-grassland vegetation community and the site itself is situated on a mid-slope bench where a commanding view of the Rattlesnake Creek drainage area is provided.

The site (Figure 2) is a petroglyph locality with no evidence of habitation in close proximity. An isolated hemispherical outcrop of chlorite schist approximately 1 meter tall and 4 meters in diameter is literally covered with pecked and carved figures and deeply incised lines. The only other cultural feature at the site is a light scatter of chert fragments which is especially noticeable adjacent to the northern face of the rock. This chert material probably represents tools and debris used to manufacture the petroglyph designs.

PREVIOUS SITE DESIGNATIONS

A review of the archaeological literature revealed that three different state trinomials (CA-Men-433, 437, and 511) were previously assigned to the Spyrock Road site, and it was difficult to determine which number should be used (Foster 1982). The most frequently used designation is CA-Men-437, which is indicated on several early (incomplete) site records and in published reports (Heizer and Clewlow 1973, Clewlow 1978); however, this number was previously assigned to a different site located "southeast of Spyrock, 10 miles north of Dos Rios" (Weymouth 1948).

Due to this duplication of numbers, the Northwest Information Center for the California Archaeological Inventory (NICCAI) has assigned CA-Men-1912 as the site's permanent trinomial designation, and any subsequent references to this site should use this new number.

THE PETROGLYPHS

This relatively small rock contains over 100 individual elements but identification is sometimes difficult due to superimposition of figures, erosion, and the application of modern glyphs by recent visitors. Furthermore, it is likely that considerable time depth is represented and several different styles are present.

Nonetheless, the most common motifs are distinctive and have been arbitrarily separated into four main types.

The most characteristic motif at this site is the "target" or symmetrical arrangement of concentric circles (Figure 3). These are well formed and often appear in bas relief. These figures range in diameter from 10 to 40 centimeters and are composed of from 2 to 6 concentric circles (Figure 4). The center often has been pecked out into a cupule depression.

There are also numerous cupules averaging 2.5 centimeters in diameter and depth. These small, pecked-out pits are not often associated with the other motifs except as centers of "targets," but these latter cupules are larger and more polished than the isolated ones, which may be of a different style or time period. A cluster of approximately 15 highly weathered and lichen-covered cupules occurs on the east face of the rock and 20 are scattered over the upper rock surface. A few of these appear to have been obscured by the other motifs.

About six examples of a small figure thought by the writer to represent an "animal track" or "paw" are present (Figure 5). These motifs consist of a small ovoid pit with four or five short incised lines in association. These motifs are less than 8 centimeters in total length and exhibit some variation--especially in the number and arrangement of the incised lines. A few resemble figures thought to be "rain symbols" or "sunbursts," but could also be viewed as abstract representations of a mammalian paw.

Finally, there are numerous incised lines on this rock which occur in great variation in form. Some are incised "crosshatch" motifs composed of perpendicular straight lines. These are usually shallow while the remaining forms are typically cut very deep into the rock surface. A few wavy lines are present and seem to be associated with other motifs such as a "target." The largest motif on this rock is a figure composed of a combination of deeply incised straight lines arranged in a pattern resembling a bird track (Figure 6). All of these line figures seem to have been manufactured with a sharp blade (such as a chert biface) while the preceding forms often appear to have been pecked and polished.

CONCLUSION

The vast array of rock art sites in California has been organized into tentative "style areas" by numerous researchers, based upon similarities of sites within large geographic provinces (Steward 1929, Heizer and Clewlow 1973, Clewlow 1978). One of these defined areas, the North Coast petroglyph style, occupies Humboldt, Mendocino, Trinity, and Lake Counties and includes the site described in this report. While this overview of site distribution is useful, most areas have not been sufficiently investigated to warrant such a style definition.

The pioneer work of Payen (1966) revealed that at least seven well-defined styles are present in the northern Sierra Nevada alone, a region long thought to be nearly devoid of rock art. The Spyrock Road site is remarkably similar to one of the petroglyph styles found in that region, the Valley-Sierran Abstract. This style is characterized (Payen 1966:62-64) by the following traits:

- 1) Dominant use of circle, line, dot, and wavy line elements, and combinations of these elements including forms based on the circle. Wavy lines terminated by a circle or dot, and concentric circles consisting of from two to nine circles are common design types.
- 2) Rock selection is outcroppings or boulders of basalt, granite, or metamorphic rocks which have flat smooth surfaces.
- 3) The style is found in varying situations with respect to association with other cultural features. Some sites occur in isolated locations, often situated on hilltops commanding a view of the terrain.

Payan's site 51 along Deer Creek in Sacramento County is a good example of a Style 6 (Valley-Sierran Abstract) petroglyph which resembles the Spyrock site. The Deer Creek rock is also hemispherical, dominated by large concentric circles and deeply incised lines, and is surrounded by chert tool fragments and debris used to manufacture the glyphs. There is also some evidence that the Deer Creek boulder is a winter solstice observation site.

Since the North Coast petroglyph style area was proposed based upon only eight recorded sites, the identification seems premature because very few surveys have been conducted in the region.

The Spyrock Road site is a complex petroglyph assemblage which sharply contrasts with the tentative identification of a North Coast petroglyph style as defined by Clewlow (1978:622). Since the Spyrock site is not likely to be an aberrant example, several unique styles could also be recognized within this area if additional site data were available. It is hoped that future research in northwestern California will test this possibility and that more meaningful interpretations will be presented.

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Figure 1. Site vicinity map.

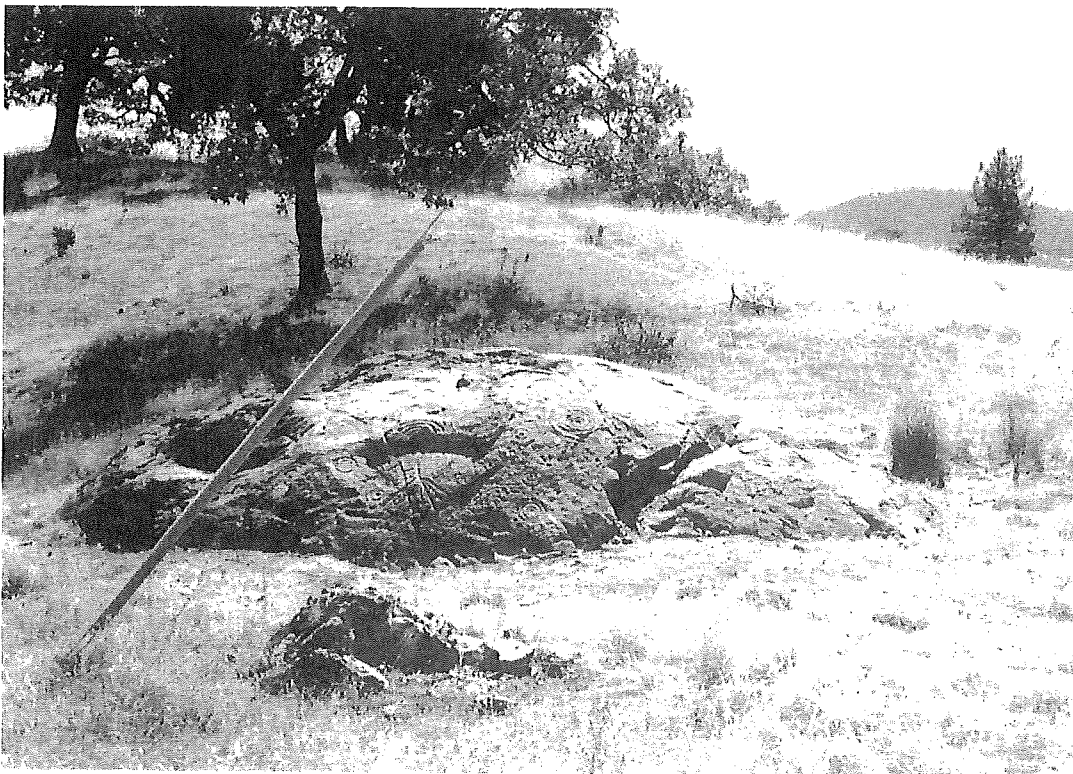


Figure 2. The Spyrock Road petroglyph site.



Figure 3. Major petroglyph elements.



Figure 4. Concentric circle motifs.

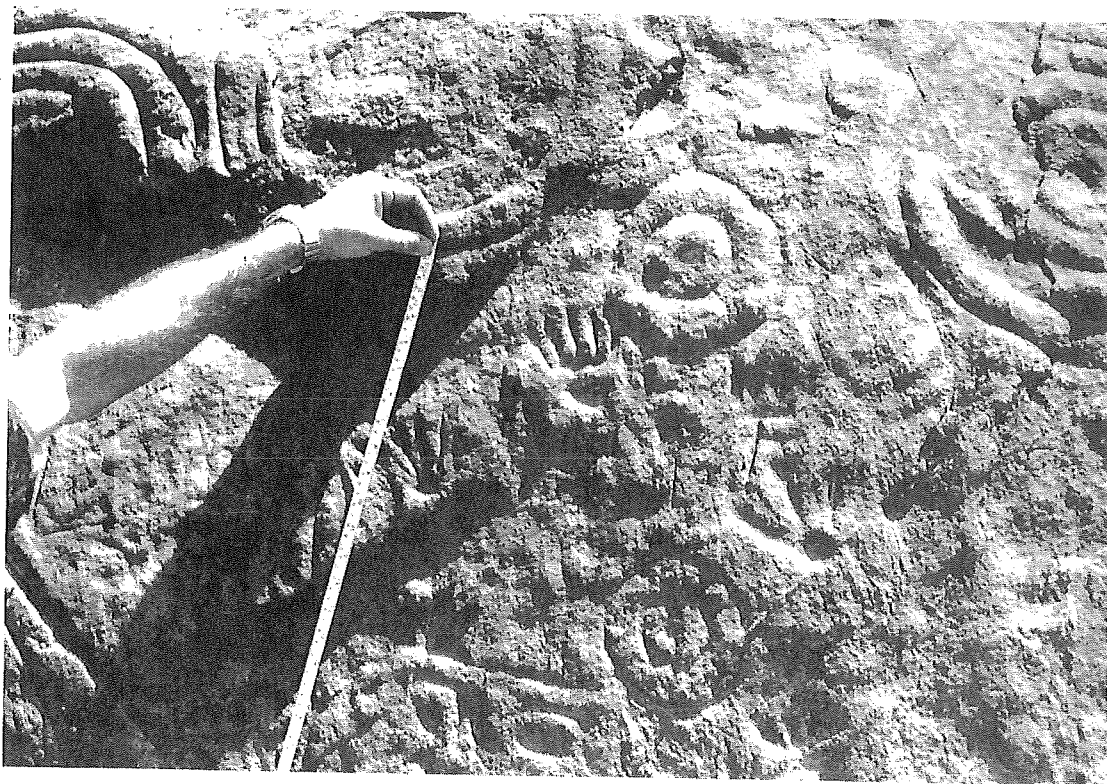


Figure 5. Animal track motifs.

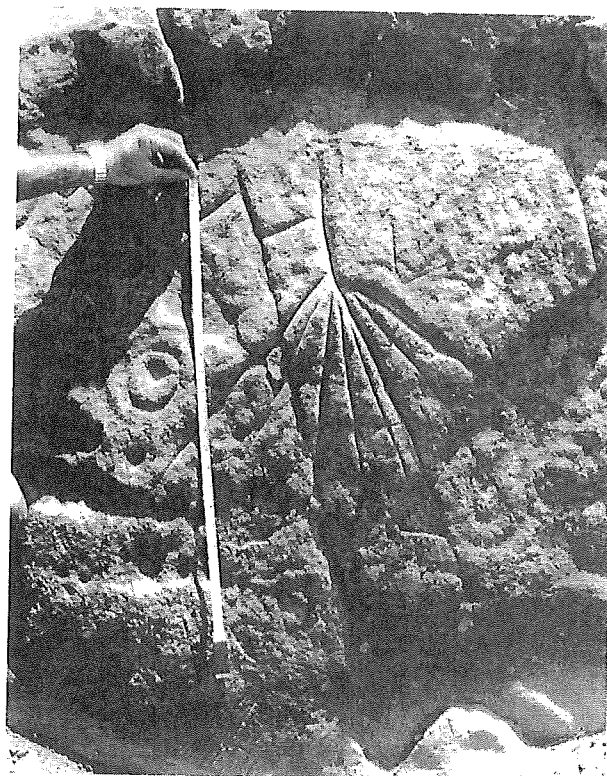


Figure 6. Incised line pattern.